

Asking the Quiet Fire

The Forest As Teacher

I ask the autumn forest where
my grandmother has gone.

The quiet fire replies,
"On down this road,
around a further bend."

I ask why she has gone so far.

Again I hear the forest's quiet fire,
"She isn't far, not far at all."

I ask the forest why
its leaves are turning color.

"Only to allow their
falling down to earth
to make a fertile mattress
for the winter snow."

I ask the forest
whether I myself am
turning color
like these leaves.

The forest answers,
"Yes, your life is cyclical,
like that of leaves,
and all you've done
will fall away
to fertilize your
next encounter
with the summer sun."

I ask why there is
human pain and error.

Soon the forest says,
"There is a larger scheme
within which solitary lives abide.
My scattered twigs may fall,
whole trunks break off,
but underneath these failures
lies an all-embracing safety.
Twigs born high fall low,
and so it is with human beings,
but pain and error feed
the healthy breathings, in and out,
of greater lungs than yours."

I ask how trees remember
where their sap is kept in winter.

Patiently the forest says,
"Communities of roots
contain an underknowing
as to where all sap
and nourishment belong,
just as your deepest sleep
allows reentry into wakefulness
with no lost memory
and even increased energy.
You move about, and yet
your rootedness remains."

I ask the forest how
disease and selfishness
can be allowed
within the same grand scheme
that makes a splash of colors
beautify the autumn months.

The forest turns my vision
to a tree half-fallen,
yet held up by neighbor trees.
It then inquires of me,
"If all were health,
then where would people learn
the golden art of altruism?"

I ask the forest why
some people suffer
from events they've
had no part in causing.

Pausing at this question,
it replies, "Like forest life,
humanity is fully interwoven.
Say that I'm a healthy branch
but on a sickly tree,
and fall to earth one day
along with this whole tree
whose weakness in the trunk
gives way to heavy winds.
But I'm not just this hapless branch,
now fallen in my prime--
I'm also Forest as a whole.
The spring will see me sprout again
as leaf or branch exactly where
some sapling may have need of me."

I ask the forest
to suppose all trees
were burned away,
and every human died--
what then?

"You ask me more
than forests know,
but never doubt

with such an earth as this,
where air and water flow,
where soil and lightning meet--
that here the Silent Force
may manifest itself as life,
and grow again.

In fact, my roots feel far
beyond their depth
to areas of sustenance
where life is all there is."

I ask the forest who it was
that made this scheme
of life and death.

I look at trees and sky and soil
while waiting for an answer.

All around and all within
is silence.

Copyright © 1997 by Alan Harris. All rights reserved.
From *An Everywhere Oasis* at www.alharris.com